

**TOILET TALES:
A SOCIOTECHNICAL EVOLUTION THROUGH
THE HISTORY OF PUBLIC PAY TOILETS**

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*“The culture of a nation can be recognized
by the walls of public toilets” – Unknown*

INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I will explore the evolution of public toilets across diverse eras and regions and echoes not only social and technological shifts but also the shifting paradigms and ideologies. Tracing back to Ancient Rome, where urine was once taxed and considered precious, reveals a unique interplay between resource value and societal norms. This taxation and utilization of human waste reflect an era as driven by the growth-driven economic models as we see today.

Fast-forwarding to contemporary times, the emergence of Sanifair restrooms along German highways highlights the complexities of a privatized, technology-laden approach to public conveniences. These restrooms, embedded in a capitalist framework, often portray technology and commercialized infrastructure as solutions for everything except the all-time long remaining shame.

ANCIENT ROME: THE GOLDEN AGE OF PEE AND PAY

Picture ancient Rome—urine wasn't just liquid waste; it was worth money. Yes, you read that right. Emperor Nero slapped a tax on the collection of pee, and his successor, Vespasian, doubled down on that golden opportunity in 74 AD.

But at least it was the state itself providing the facility with all its luxuries and infrastructures: canalization, water, sponges on sticks, washed after every use by the restroom attendant—yes, you read that right—to clean yourself, even ventilation in the buildings. But believe me, it still stunk. No surprise that there is that famous saying, “Pecunia non olet” [Money doesn't stink?] You guessed it; it referred to coins earned from pee. Emperor Vespasian even joked about it, holding up a coin and quipping to his son, “Yet it comes from urine.”

But at least in theory, that tax money went back into the infrastructure the facilities were built on. (Jansen, G., Koloski-Ostrow, A., & Moormann, E., 2011). I'm talking about the cities, the streets, and the canalization. But probably most of the money went into wars and the building of the Colosseum. But that's another story. Who used these facilities, called *foricae*? Well, in theory, they were for everyone, but women usually avoided those dark and stinky places, and the elite preferred to avoid them altogether. The wealthy had their personal latrines in their comfortable villas, usually constructed over a cesspit and emptied and cleaned by *stercorarii*, workers hired to remove manure.



Public latrinae in Ostia Antica, Italy,
Photo: Fubar Obfusco

But here's something often overlooked—there were attendants at these toilets, often slaves, doing more than just cleaning. They served as protection against vandalism and, in an often-forgotten historical note that sounds like an innovation today: they assisted minority groups, including people with disabilities or the elderly.

In the context of ancient Rome, the sociotechnical imaginaries were reflected in the advanced engineering of public infrastructure, including canalization and public toilets, which were taken for granted. Urine was used for various purposes. The use of slaves in maintaining the facilities also highlighted the social dynamics. These aspects demonstrate how the sociotechnical imaginaries of ancient Rome were shaped by the collective visions and practices related to public health, sanitation, and social hierarchies. A good example of the overall belief is the Roman poet Virgil, who in his national epic, the Aeneid, prophesied “an empire without limit”. (Jansen, G., Koloski-Ostrow, A., & Moormann, E., 2011).

HAMBURG, 1830: THE “ABTRITTANBIETERIN” AND INFRASTRUCTURE EXPLOITATION

Fast forward to 1830 in Hamburg, Germany—picture bustling streets and marketplaces. Until not long ago, everyone conducted their ‘business’ wherever urgent needs arose. However, the city’s authorities enacted a law prohibiting public urination and defecation, offering no alternative places to relieve oneself outside the home. This era marked the peak of the **Abtrittanbieterin** [Walking Toilet] phenomenon—individuals who made a living by carrying buckets filled with nature’s less pleasant surprises. Predominantly women, as they were (and largely still are today) the primary caregivers for infants and the elderly.



Repro of Abtrittsanbieterin, Museum
Tabakspeicher (Germany)

Imagine a person donning a huge coat, with a wooden construction on their shoulders and behind their neck, buckets hanging at each end. Sometimes these individuals covered their faces for anonymity but

remained visible, shouting phrases through the streets like: “Wer will, wer mag, um ein Kreuzer in mei Butten scheißen?” [Who wants, who dares, to drop a coin to defecate in my bucket?]. Whether you were a traveler, a farmer selling goods in the city, or had no alternative for relief, this was the opportunity. For a fee, the “Abtrittsanbieterin” would open her coat, creating a private space where only your head was visible, allowing you to squat over one of the buckets—the left for minor needs and the right for major ones.

The service often included eco-friendly wiping materials like straw, leaves, or any available materials. The collected urine was sold for leather tanning and cleaning, reminiscent of practices in Ancient Rome. However, these providers, private individuals in their profession, weren’t solely engaged in ‘business’; they effectively tapped into the city’s infrastructure and streets, offering a unique service that the city itself was yet unable to provide.

BERLIN, 1870S: BIRTH OF PUBLIC TOILETS



A satirical old postcard, (1905-1907)

Now, let’s jump to Berlin a few years later. The city faced a big problem: Until 1842, everyone had their night pots—pot-like containers under or next to the bed, picked up by “Nachtstuhl-Frauen” [night-potty women], who emptied them into the Spree the following morning. Imagine a summer night. (“The Berlin Exhibition of Hygiene in 1882-83,” 1885)

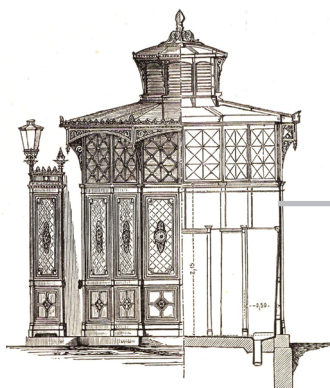
But where to go when nature called during the day, outside your home? Well, things got interesting. People relieved themselves in the streets. But the people were asking for more. The chant: “Ach lieber Vater Hinckeldey

[police president] / mach uns für unsre Pinkelei / doch bitte einen Winkel frei!" [Oh dear Father Hinckeldey, make a corner free for our tinkling!"] echoed through the streets. August Bebel, a social democrat, complained in his book (Bebel, A. (1910). *Aus meinem Leben*) about the city's poor hygiene. There were no sewers back then. Instead, streets were full of waste, making the air unpleasant on warm days. And public toilets? Nowhere yet to be found!



»Berlin's neue Anschlag-Säulen«,
Lithography, ca. 1855

Then came Ernst Litfaß, a businessman with an idea: "Litfaß-Säulen" [advertising pillars"]. The current head of the police made this initiative revolutionary. Demanding the 180 planned advertising pillars to include urinals inside them. Unfortunately, the pillars were erected, but the urinals inside did not materialize—only the advertisement pillars. This sociotechnical imaginary represents a historical shift to urban advertising practices instead of unsystematic and ubiquitous posting of pamphlets, notices, and other materials in Berlin at the time. And public hygiene. And even if they would have happened, they were for men only. Finally, in 1863, Berlin got its first public toilet—a wooden hut, obviously for men only again. Thirteen years later came the first upgrade—the first toilet that flushed! They called it the "Madai-Tempel" [Madai-Temple] after police president Guido von Madai, who deemed these facilities essential, and free for him. But even then, most (I guess men) thought women should do their business at home. In parks, at least private companies offered bathrooms for women, but of course, they had to pay to use them. By the 1870s, Berlin got more serious about public toilets. Fancy places with names like Café Achteck and Café Wellblech popped up across the city, offering free toilets for every man. Finally, in 1882, the city installed its first public toilets for women too.



Sketch of "Café Achteck", Wilhelm
Ernst & Sohn 1896

Therefore, the emergence of public toilets in 19th-century Berlin can be seen as a manifestation of evolving sociotechnical imaginaries, reflecting a collective vision of improved public health and urban sanitation through technological and infrastructural advancements.

20TH CENTURY: RISE AND FALL OF PAY TOILETS IN AMERICA

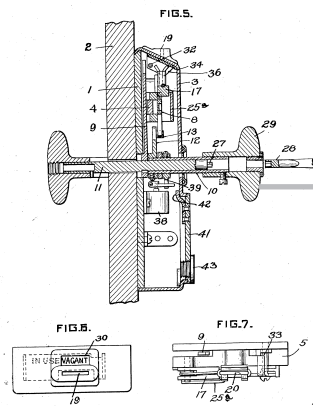


Electricity Building at Chicago World
fair (1893), Brooklyn Museum

Let's journey across the ocean to 1893, to the World's Columbian Exposition, also known as the Chicago World's Fair. It served as a perfect experimental ground for a pay-for-pee setup within a temporary event focused on various infrastructures—trade, city amenities, and exhibition spaces. Pay toilets, offering luxuries like soap and towels, charged a nickel per use (equivalent to about \$1.85 today) overseen by a toilet attendant.

Only two complaints were noted, both from women who found the few free restrooms at the event not only unsanitary but also challenging to locate (Freeborn Country News, 1893, May 5). This led to a clever solution of putting up signs for free toilets, yet the argument for paying for public toilets remained the same: "You don't have to use them if you don't want to" (Middletown Times-Press, 1893, May 27, The Public Comfort: How Visitors are Cared for at the World's Fair). Pay toilets were widely accepted or at least tolerated for two primary reasons. Firstly, the unpleasant design made the free choice as uncomfortable as possible, just short of intolerable. Secondly, discussing toilets, bodily functions, and related matters was considered improper in polite society; shame led to the dominance of business interests. This attitude somewhat persists today. Most people didn't mind paying at the fair, knowing that after the event, they could return to using free facilities at train stations and at home. However, this was about to change (Richards, K., 2018).

A wave of inventions and patents emerged, including those around public toilets, specifically coin locks. John Maskelyne in the UK patented a more efficient



US1341433; Smith, M. H. (1922)

way, a coin lock (GB189420360A), just a year after the fair, to ensure payment for restroom use, followed by subsequent patents from W.R. Neckerman in 1919 (US1341433), M.H. Smith in 1922 (US1432306), M.H. Richardson et al. in 1924 (US1624980) and many more patents piled up on both sides of the Atlantic. Another coin-lock pay toilet appeared in 1911 at Terre Haute, Indiana, preventing non-ticket holders from merely admiring the revolutionary indoor plumbing.

The era of luxury and tantalizing future technologies soon faded. Plumbing, toilet paper, and soap became standard restroom provisions. There was no longer a need to collect a coin at the door; instead, attendants periodically cleaned and restocked. However, these facilities were exclusively for white people. Similar to Rosa Parks, Sammy Younge Jr., a Black man, entered a public restroom in Alabama in 1966, tragically leading to his murder by a white man enraged by his use of the facility (Temple University, 2022).

The rise and fall of pay toilets weren't just about coins; it was a narrative deeply woven into society's fabric, widely covered in newspapers until the 1960s. Advocates for pay toilets praised their benefits, covering maintenance costs, generating city income, maintaining tidier bathrooms, and preventing vandalism (Richards, K., 2018). However, the '60s and '70s, the eras of Civil Rights, anti-war movements, and feminism, brought about change, even in bathroom access. CEPITA, the Committee to End Pay Toilets in America, emerged in 1970, starting small but rapidly growing, rallying against pay toilets. Their arguments labeled these gates as barriers to basic needs and "a slight against women" (as urinals had no coin locks).

It was a clash between two American giants: capitalism and free enterprise versus basic human decency. The Wall Street Journal estimated in 1976 that around half of the public pay toilets in the US removed their locks. "The impact of CEPITA [...] was too significant to ignore."

The legislative battle wasn't merely about restrooms; it was a fight for dignity, fairness, and the right to access toilets without payment.

In summary, the rise and fall of pay toilets in 20th-century America intertwined deeply with evolving sociotechnical imaginaries, mirroring shifting societal attitudes toward public hygiene, urban infrastructure, and social justice. The movements against pay toilets signaled a shift in sociotechnical imaginaries, emphasizing dignity, fairness, and reflecting broader societal struggles between capitalism and human decency.

EARLY 21TH CENTURY: THE MACHINE AGE: SANIFAIR, CAMERAS, AND INVISIBLE JANITORS



Sanifair Voucher, Photo: rastanlage
Inntal (2006)

Zoom into the 2000s, and we're in Germany, with Sanifair restrooms popping up on the Autobahn. Picture this: a gate, a turnstile, and 50 cents for a ticket to a bathroom experience woven right into the fabric of the country's infrastructure. But wait, what's this gate hiding behind its technological facade? It's hiding more than you think—namely, the people. Yes, the folks who handle the money and upkeep, and the never-ending debate from the past 200 years about whether using the public toilet should be a free government-provided service, a basic human right (Richards, 2018). I remember well those restroom attendants of yore, stationed with their half-filled plates on flimsy plastic chairs at the restroom door to collect a fee. Oddly, it was always a 'she'—I can't recall seeing a man in that chair.



Sanifair Restroom Gate, Photo: tank.
rast.de (2022)

But back to the bathroom experience. A glimpse into a promising future. Rotating seats, automatic cleaning toilets, touchless paper towel dispensers. A sociotechnical imaginary that technology is making everything easier, better. Meanwhile, as thousands in the automobile industry lost jobs, fingers pointed at machines as the culprits (Köncke, 2022). But hold up, where did those old restroom attendants vanish? They didn't disappear; they simply became invisible. Less shame for the need of the private business. And no coin directly passed to someone else for something so dirty. What I was observing in one of the Sanifair restrooms is that they were tucked away in windowless rooms, only emerging when the coast was clear, cleaned like clockwork. And those omnipresent cameras (no, no cameras are watching you pee, but watching you on every move as soon as you step outside that 1,5 square meter room of privacy).

Speaking of undervalued or unseen workers (Shapin, 1989; Scott, 1991), infrastructures we often take for granted (Star & Ruhleder, 1994) – if not always – are maintained by them. (The bespoke Sanifair restrooms are designed to hide this manual service and maintenance. What a great example of hiding labor, shame around defecation and the flow of money to a monopoly, through design behind a facade of milky glass, elegant stainless steel, high-resolution screens and ambient music with forest sounds.

Now, let's talk about dirty money. Remember the coins left for the restroom attendant? We hoped it was extra pocket money for her on top of her salary. But now what about the predefined Sanifair fee (50 cents in 2003, now 1 Euro in 2023) we toss into the machine for access with the lighted logo of Sanifair (Birkner, 2022; Bundesverband der Verbraucherzentralen, 2018)? Where does that money go? The machine's logo hints it's not the gas station—different logo! It's the logo we spotted on the street sign a few kilometers back. The

sign was paid for by tax money—our money. So, after splurging on overpriced gas or not, as we pull over for a bathroom break, guess who's footing the bill for the parking space? The state—taxes—us. Hence, Sanifair had made a promise during privatization: 'We'll aim to provide year-round free sanitary facilities.' (Law of Privatization of public bathrooms along German Motorways). Good job in stretching the word free. Because instead of a receipt you get a voucher with the value of the fee (except for a few years when the voucher was 20 cents less than the access fee), but the truth is you are only allowed to use one voucher per payment and only if you spend more than 2,50 Euro. Easy, if the cheapest water in the gas station exceeds the voucher's value. And no, no chance, you can use it to save a few cents on the overpriced gas. Gas excluded. But don't wait too long to use your voucher, if you store them in the car the heat of the next summer will dissolve the thermo print and after one year they are anyway not valid anymore. I leave it to you if you would say that's the definition of "free".

Let's summarize that there are a lot of players around the toilet business: gas station owners, toilet operators (in Germany this is the monopoly of Sanifair), the state, the taxpayers, the users, the employees (formerly known as toilet attendants on the plastic chair). Likely they all have different sociotechnical imaginaries of automation (Toll, 2022). The gas station owners might be happy to outsource their toilet business. Technology of surveillance and automation is welcomed. The state hopes for shortcuts of privatization of the toilet business high results, but they are devastatingly shitty. We know who is paying for the infrastructure around this business's facility. Not even to mention the tax havens. But that is a different story.

Some users might think that's just another technology, not able to replace the luxury of a "real" toilet attendant like in the luxurious clubs and restaurants of New York

where a toilet attendant passes you the towel, if you had a drink too much handing you a painkiller and giving you a shoulder to cry. But most users (taxpayers) might think that this technology gives us clean, safe, and shiny toilets. But please – for free. But there is no alternative and we are still too ashamed to openly talking about businesses on our business.

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